

GONZAGUE RYCKMANS

With the passing on 3 September 1969 of Monseigneur Gonzague Ryckmans, Professor Emeritus of the Catholic University of Louvain, oriental scholarship in the best tradition stands bereft of one of its most humane and best loved representatives. Not only was he a scholar of international standing in the somewhat recherché field of pre-Islamic Arabian epigraphy, a man whose encyclopaedic knowledge and shrewd judgement justly made him the Nestor of that select study, but he was also endowed with a charming and modest disposition, tempered with a refined sense of humour, which assured him the lasting friendship and admiration of all with whom he came into contact. Through the rare combination of these qualities, it was a pleasure and an honour to have dealings with him, whether in person or by correspondence, and any request, however slight, would bring the petitioner a prompt and courteous response. Gonzague Ryckmans' generation bestowed on him a double advantage. On the one hand he could benefit, without direct involvement, from the more positive aspects of the vintage era of the formidable polymaths, the Müllers, the Glasers, and the Hommels, whose pioneering pronouncements and interpretations, viewed from our present sophisticated standpoint, can at times seem as perplexing as they may equally be remarkable for their sudden shafts of inspiration. On the other hand he could stand aside from the contemporary school of the specialist archaeologist or palaeographer *per se*, each pursuing his own narrow commitment with all too deliberate disregard for its relevance to the wider issue. The polymaths were as alarming for the acrimony and personal abuse which marred their writings, as the moderns are for their sheer clinical efficiency. Ryckmans belonged rather to a generation of scholars who appreciated the dangers inherent in involving themselves in too wide and heterogeneous a field of study, and consequently preferred to limit their horizons to what they felt confident they could handle with justice and proper understanding. The benefits accruing from this more modest approach are clearly evidenced in the quality of his own contributions to his chosen field. In short, Ryckmans was a philologist in the best sense. He took to himself the study of ancient South Semitic inscriptions in their every aspect, without prejudice and without any preconceived philosophy to advocate. He let his materials prove their own point, or let them rest if they were too fragmentary, and could thus afford, where necessary, to modify his results with dignity in the light of subsequent findings. Equally there was no need for rancour on his part towards colleagues who might arrive at conclusions differing from his own. At his home in Louvain he maintained a sort of clearing-house for news and views where colleagues of all nationalities and academic persuasions could count on a warm welcome and ready assistance. There can be few who have not benefited from his unstinting kindness and generosity, and appreciated his fund of good humour in a field which is all too notorious for its idiosyncracy and conflict. As a discipline the study of Old South Arabian stands in an invidious position. There is enough material now to inspire a measure of confidence into our understanding



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of the basic facts of the language, yet hardly enough to furnish it with its own inner momentum. Thus the discipline tends to be underrated, if not ignored, by scholars in related specialities who might otherwise stand to benefit from its findings, and there are few willing to popularize its results. Its inbred isolation therefore stood all the more in need of an unprejudiced spokesman of the calibre of the deceased.

Louis Constant de Gonzague Ryckmans was born in Antwerp on 10 December 1887, into a family distinguished as much within the legal profession as in the Church. After schooling at the St. Jan Berchmans College in his native city, he continued his education at the Catholic University of Louvain and the Séminaire Théologique at Mechlin, before joining the company of distinguished archaeologists and Biblical scholars at the École Biblique Française in Jerusalem. His experiences there, and later at the École des Hautes Études in Paris, contributed largely to the shaping of his future interests and initiated a period of collaboration with many of France's leading orientalists which was to bear rich fruit in his later years. At the Sorbonne he gained a doctorate in Semitic languages, but at this point the first World War interrupted his career, and for the duration of that terrible period in Belgium's history he served at the front as a Military Chaplain. Thereafter his life was devoted to academic work. In 1920 he was appointed to a teaching post at the Grand Séminaire at Mechlin and remained there till 1930 when he was translated to a Professorship in Semitic Philology and Epigraphy at his old University of Louvain. His tenure of that chair, from which he retired in 1958, was one of singular distinction. Fortified by his association with a galaxy of specialists in the various aspects of Eastern Christian and oriental studies, he maintained a steady output of books, articles, and reviews on his chosen subject, which were invariably characterized by incisiveness, maturity of judgement, and the absence of tendentiousness. As a matter of course he became closely associated with the work of the Oriental Institute of Louvain, founded in 1936, which, though small and hard-pressed for accommodation, established for itself, through its scholarly publications, a reputation second to none in the Western world.

Ryckmans' record of scholarly writing began in 1921 with the publication of an inscribed Minaean seal preserved in Louvain ('Un sceau avec inscription sud-arabe', *Le Muséon*, xxxiv, 1, 1921, 115). It was a modest start, to be sure, and it was perhaps characteristic of his essential humility that his publications remained infrequent for some years. In due course, however, the Commission of the *Corpus inscriptionum semiticarum* charged him with the edition of the *Répertoire d'épigraphie sémitique*, which, from Tom. v, was to be devoted almost entirely to South Arabian texts. This task, which entailed the amassing and editing of already published materials not included in the *Corpus*, he carried out with tact and economy, and the three volumes which he produced between 1928 and 1950, with almost 2,500 texts, remain to this day the veritable Bible of all *sud-arabisants*. He was also invited to undertake the continuation of the fourth part of the *Corpus*, devoted to Sabaean inscriptions, but as yet this has not

materialized in view of the vast bulk of texts awaiting publication. Concurrently with his work on the *Répertoire* he initiated his own series of 'Inscriptions sud-arabes' in the 1927 issue of *Le Muséon*, his aim being to provide a convenient medium for the publication of new materials from any source under continuing serial numbers. The advantage of this from the point of view of reference alone was quickly appreciated and assured him a steady supply of texts from museums and private individuals throughout the world. This kept the undertaking going through 22 series and 733 numbers till 1965. As with the *Répertoire*, commentary was kept to a minimum and the raw materials were rather offered to the scholarly world for individual comment and interpretation. From time to time Ryckmans would also publish his valuable 'Notes épigraphiques' in the same journal, where he would expand on individual points of interest. He rapidly established his position as the epigraphist *par excellence* for ancient Arabia, and it fell to his lot to publish the epigraphical sections of several expedition reports, notably for the Hadrami texts discovered by E. Gardner and G. Caton Thompson at Hurayda (see the latter's *The tombs and Moon temple of Hureidha (Hadhramaut)*, London, 1944), and the important materials copied by Ahmed Fakhry during his travels in the Yemen in 1947 (*An archaeological journey to the Yemen*, 3 vols., Cairo, 1951–2). On the whole he avoided discussion of a controversial nature, and his contributions to the field of historical interpretation were scant, and in any event fated to be superseded by the work of his own pupils after the palaeographical revolution associated with the name of Mlle. Jacqueline Pirenne. His interests rather lay in comparative religion and several studies stand to his credit in this area, above all his *Les religions arabes préislamiques* (Louvain, 1951), a masterpiece of precision and clarity in a subject notorious for vague theorizing. Closely associated with his interests in the pre-Islamic pantheon lay the study of onomastics, and recourse to his superbly efficient indexing system enabled him to produce his monumental *Les noms propres sud-sémitiques* (3 vols., Louvain, 1934–5), a pioneering work which still retains its value to the student, though requiring supplementation from the enormous finds of the subsequent decades. Although the two afore-mentioned works utilize materials from all the epigraphically attested cultures of ancient Arabia, practical 'demarcation' limited his scope as an editor largely to Old South Arabian and Safaitic, the language of the Bedouin of Syria. In this area he was responsible for the production in 1950 of the first fascicle of Pars v of the *Corpus inscriptionum semiticarum*, in which over 5,000 of their texts are published. His one major excursion outside the Peninsula consisted of a short *Grammaire accadienne* (Louvain, 1938), the first elementary work on the subject to appear in French for almost four decades and now into its fourth edition. Though hardly to be compared with any of the great reference grammars, it remains a useful tool to anyone desirous of a rapid orientation in the language.

Although essentially an arm-chair scholar in the most constructive sense of the term, Ryckmans made one major concession to the contemporary emphasis

on 'involvement' when, between October 1951 and February 1952, he participated in an exploratory reconnaissance of central Arabia, some 5,500 kilometres long, almost half of it over virtual *terra incognita*. His companions on the journey were his nephew Jacques, St. John Philby, the intrepid explorer of Arabia and close friend of the Canon, and the Belgian officer Philippe Lippens. The itinerary covered the old trade-route from Jidda to Tā'if, Turaba, Bīsha, Abhā, Kuhayf, and Najrān, and then north to Kawkab, Dam, and Riyadh, territories of crucial importance for cultural expansion in the Peninsula. This might have been sufficiently taxing even to a younger man, but Ryckmans' unfailing energy proved more than a match for the asperities of the terrain, and the expedition is worthy to be inscribed with honour in the annals of Arabian exploration. Apart from the topographical information which it yielded, the epigraphic results were more than impressive. A grand total of over 12,000 texts were copied; 9,000 of them were Thamudic, representing a five-fold increase over the number hitherto published, and their significance for the early history of the region can hardly be overstated. More immediately impressive, however, was a small group of late Sabaean historical texts from the vicinity of Najrān, Kawkab, and the ancient caravan route across Arabia. (See series x of 'Inscriptions sud-arabes', *Le Muséon*, LXVI, 3-4, 1953, 267-317.) These were to shed important light on the activities of the Himyarite rulers in the closing centuries of the pre-Islamic period, and the flurry of interpretation which attended their publication has not yet died down.

Ryckmans' stature as a scholar received international recognition. Apart from the distinctions conferred upon him by his own country—he was a Grand Officier of the Order of Leopold and Officier of the Order of Leopold II—he was a Foreign Member of the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Associate Member of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, and Honorary Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, of the Société Asiatique de Paris, and of the American Oriental Society. His loyalties, however, remained firmly invested in his old University of Louvain, where he remained until his death. It was in his time there, and in no small measure through his influence, that *Le Muséon* and its associated monograph series, *Bibliothèque du Muséon*, where most of his own work appeared, developed into solid and respected organs of reliable and meticulous scholarship, attracting contributions from academics of many nationalities. He forged a bond between his subject and his *alma mater* which it is hard to imagine ever being dissolved. While the presence there of his nephew, Professor Jacques Ryckmans, has assured the continuation of his scholarly ideals, his colleagues everywhere will be deeply conscious of the loss of his kindly presence.

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